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At last, some candor shown on streetcar

By Brian Chasnoff

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“Wake up! Wake UP! WAAAAKKKEE UUUPPPP!!!!”

The San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association sent this caffeinated command to rank-and-file firefighters in a recent email, rallying them to help collect 20,000 signatures to force a public vote on the \$280 million streetcar project.

Why should firefighters care about a downtown rail project?

The union itself anticipates this indifference in the email.

“‘Why?’ ‘Who cares about that?’ ‘It doesn't matter.’ YES IT MATTERS — it makes all the difference in the world to you and our Union!!!!”

But why?

“If we cannot do this we will be seen as politically irrelevant and WE CAN BE IGNORED!!! And that means (City) Council will have no problem voting against us.”

How refreshingly honest.

Here, the union is referring not to streetcar, but rather to an upcoming vote on the city's 2015 budget, a vote by which council members could shift uniformed personnel over to the city's civilian insurance plans.

The city wants this because it spends more than \$12,500 a year per uniformed employee, more than it spends per civilian employee: about \$7,000. As health care costs balloon, the firefighters association is preparing to negotiate with the city on its contract.

The union's emailed exclamations amount to a remarkably candid confession: In order to sustain rich benefits, it believes it must make a show of force for council members, impressing upon them its political power.

In other words, the union wants to cow the council into capitulation.

“Council members see us and are reminded that no other organization in the City can mobilize people like this,” the email states.

On Monday, I thought I'd call a few council members and test this theory.

Would a union's ability to mobilize voters against streetcar make any difference in the way a council member votes on the budget? After all, doesn't this suggest a threat to re-election?

“No,” said District 5 Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales.

“Although we are elected officials and that's always a risk that we take, the fact is that really our responsibility is to be financial stewards of the taxpayers' dollars,” she continued.

“Unfortunately, the way that it's coming out from their perspective definitely makes it an, 'Us vs. them.'”

Last year, Gonzales ousted an incumbent, David Medina, without any help from the San Antonio Police Officers Association, which rallied behind the loser. SAPOA also supported a loser in District 8, where Councilman Ron Nirenberg emerged victorious.

Incidentally, Nirenberg's perspective mirrors Gonzales'.

“For anyone to think that streetcar will address public safety issues is disingenuous,” he said. “More important is the fact that we have a strong financial environment and we have a strong public safety department. ... We can't be distracted by lame talking points that have nothing to do with the budget.”

Apparently, the association's fear of political irrelevance could be justified.

Greg Brockhouse, spokesman for the firefighters union, acknowledged as much.

(I called Brockhouse on Monday because Chris Steele, president of the union and arbiter of its email blasts, won't return my calls.)

“The days of the union and their relationships with elected officials in San Antonio are gone,” Brockhouse said. “The kind of influence they had is gone. So they kind of have to reinvent themselves and establish some political strength again.

“That's what this is about, going straight to the voter, straight to the community,” he continued. “The only thing a city council member cares about is re-election.”

Brockhouse later clarified this comment: “When you talk about it from a purely political standpoint, that's what I'm referencing.”

The unions, though, need to wake up to another reality: Many on council see through the ruse that streetcar would imperil public safety. It's time to talk on the merits.